

First isaiahs call to seek justice theology religion essay



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Chapter 22. 1 Introduction The issue that haunts the soul of a prophet is not a question, but a bitter exclamation: How marvelous is the world that God has created! And how horrible is the world that man has made! [1] It was this exclamation that functioned as a foundational force for the visions of doom Isaiah had expressed already in the eighth century B. C. E. Jerusalem, destined to be the place from which the word of God went forth (Isa 2: 3), a faithful city that was full of justice and had righteousness lodged in, had become a harlot (1: 21). Princes were scoundrels (1: 23); priests were drunkards (28: 7); judges were corrupt, acquitting the guilty for a bribe and depriving the innocent of his right (5: 23). They did not defend the fatherless, and the widow's case did not come before them (1: 23). The poor were crushed by the leaders, while the mansions of the wealthy contained the spoils of the poor (3: 14). Having witnessed such a depressing situation of the state, Isaiah was consumed by the fire that came from the depth of a divine anguish. He denounced the oppressors and hurled bitter words at the oppressive structures: the gross neglect and exploitation of widows, orphans, and the poor (1: 17, 23; 10: 2; 11: 4); corrupt legal practices that imparted the appearance of legitimacy to wrongdoing (3: 14; 5: 23; 10: 1); the greedy accumulation of property and possessions (2: 7; 3: 16-23; 5: 8-9; 10: 2-3); violence and bloodshed (1: 15, 21; 5: 7); a public policy of deceit and lies (28: 15); oppression (1: 17; 3: 15; 5: 7); luxuriant, debauched lifestyle (5: 11, 12, 22; 28: 1, 7-8; 32: 9); and neglect of the under-classes (1: 22). An active liberation of the poor from all these social destructiveness became a major thrust of Isaiah. He showed great passion for a just society. He thundered against any kind of perversion of justice. He voiced his protest against all unjust political, social and religious establishments. This dream of Isaiah for a

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just and an egalitarian society was based on the covenant values of justice (משפט) and righteousness (צדקה). It was these two virtues which primarily set Isaiah into action to clamorously argue for the rights of the poor, downtrodden and marginalized people of the society and to vehemently criticize the unjust practices of the rich and the powerful. Hence, any reconstruction of Isaiah's prophetic thought on social justice today to make it an effective tool for the functioning of subaltern hermeneutics needs an in-depth analysis of Isaiah's attitude towards the use of the words צדקה, משפט and their cognates. Such a task in Isa 1-39 is taken up for discussion in this chapter. Having analyzed the semantic, exegetical and theological development of all the cognates of the Hebrew roots שפט and צדק in their contexts respectively, pericopes in which these terms get the nuance of social justice will be identified. Among such pericopes, the texts which discuss in detail various social justice issues will be taken up for an elaborate study. Having done that, based on the two sets of analysis done: (1) analysis of all the cognates of the Hebrew roots שפט and (2) צדקה, analysis of the pericopes in which these terms get the nuance of social justice which again discuss in detail various social justice issues, the key theological notions of social justice in Isa 1-39 will be synthesized. But before that, an understanding about the historical setting in which Isaiah lived and prophesied is very vital and that follows below.

2.2 The Historical Setting

An understanding of the historical context of a particular text helps us to comprehend better the meaning of the same text within its original horizon of meaning.[2]The following discussion on the time, family, profession, political-religious, and socio-economic contexts of Isaiah is intended to grasp better his passion with which he condemned the injustice and raised voice

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for God's concern for justice. 2. 2. 1 Time, Family and Profession of Isaiah

Isaiah of Jerusalem was the one who had the longest period of ministry than any other prophet in Israel. The superscription of his book claims that his prophetic mission overlapped with the reigns of four Judahite kings: Uzziah (792-740 B. C. E.),^[3]Jotham (750-732), Ahaz (735-716), and Hezekiah (716-686; Isa 1: 1). Though it is difficult to pinpoint the exact years Isaiah spoke within the reign of Uzziah, the reference to the wealth of Judah and its strong military power (2: 7) suggest that the messages of Isaiah must have been delivered in the later part of Uzziah's reign, after Uzziah had attained considerable prosperity and military strength. It was at this time Uzziah would be tempted to become proud to his destruction (2 Chr 26: 6-16). Hence, one could derive that the messages of Isaiah would have come between 755-740.^[4]The length of Isaiah's service must have exceeded half a century for he was active until the Assyrian ruler Esarhaddon's accession to the throne in 680 (Isa 37: 38). At this juncture, one of the important questions we need to answer with regard to Isaiah's time from a biographical and theological point of view is: Was the call-narrative, described at chap. 6, Isaiah's original call or a later commissioning of the prophet for a new task? The opinion of the scholars with regard to this question is divided. As we don't find any other prophetic call of Isaiah in the first chapters of his book, and due to the confirmation at 6: 5 that up to that point he was among the people, some conclude that this call in question must be his inaugural calling.^[5]Those who are of this view place the beginning of Isaiah's ministry from around 740, after the death of Uzziah. However, this view fails to explain how the book records many prophetic oracles already before this decisive experience, starting from the lifetime of Uzziah (1: 1). On the <https://assignbuster.com/first-isaiahs-call-to-seek-justice-theology-religion-essay/>

contrary, those who question the notion that chap. 6 was an inaugural call, suggest looking at it as a new commissioning for a specific task. Four major arguments they present to support that this was not his original call: (1) No other original calls primarily involve giving messages to harden the hearts of listeners; (2) It is fairly certain that Isaiah was functioning as a prophet during the reign of Uzziah in chaps. 2-5, so his initial call could not have happened in the year Uzziah died; (3) There is a change in Isaiah's situation after chap. 6, with much more emphasis on political affairs and a more negative response to his preaching, thus the new commission fits chronologically at this point rather than before chap. 2; and (4) the literary structure and content of this experience is more like the special commission of Micaiah ben Imlah than the initial call of Moses.[6] In addition to these arguments, Oswalt's suggestion that the placement of chap. 6 at this point is because it introduces key themes developed in chaps. 7-12, and Hayes and Irvine's observation that Isaiah calls people to repentance in chaps. 1-5, therefore the call of chap. 6 to harden people does not fit those chapters, are noteworthy.[7] On account of these reasons discussed above, I too think in line with the second group, proposing the call-narrative of chap. 6 as a later commissioning, and so Isaiah began his ministry most probably around 755 during the later part of King Uzziah's lifetime. Youngblood quotes a Jewish tradition of the Talmud (Sota 10b) to argue that the father of Isaiah, Amoz (1: 1), was a brother of Amaziah, the father of King Uzziah of Judah (2 Kgs 14).[8] If this tradition is reliable[9], then Isaiah was a nephew of King Amaziah and a cousin of King Uzziah. With regard to Amoz's profession, Anderson suggests that he might have functioned in the king's court as a scribe, based on a seal found in Jerusalem saying " Amoz the scribe." [10] But <https://assignbuster.com/first-isaiahs-call-to-seek-justice-theology-religion-essay/>

the difficulty in accepting this suggestion would be, many could have had this name, and moreover the date of the seal is unknown either. However, this information should not be completely dismissed for Isaiah himself appears to have some sort of scribal responsibility during the reign of Uzziah (2 Chr 26: 22) and Hezekiah (32: 32), though this occupation was not necessarily an inherited position. Isaiah indicates that he was married and his wife was called a " prophetess" (8: 3). Since there is no other way to substantiate that she ever declared any prophetic message, the term " prophetess" may simply mean that she was married to a prophet. The family had at least two sons both with the symbolic names of Shear-jashub (" a remnant shall return" 7: 3) and Maher-shalal-hash-baz (" the spoil speeds, the prey hastens" 8: 1, 3). Other than the sons being figured into the prophecy with regard to the attack of Rezin and Pekah against Jerusalem (7: 1-3; 8: 1-4), and mentioning that the prophet and his sons were " signs and portents in Israel from the Lord of hosts" (8: 18), nothing more is known about the family.

2. 2. 2 The Political Context

The political context^[11] within which Isaiah ministered impacted his ministry. At this time, the world politics underwent tumultuous upheavals. On the international scene, the Neo-Assyrian Empire had revived under the leadership of Tiglath-pileser III (744-727). On the national scene, the united kingdom of Israel ended and there was divided monarchy. The animosity between the north and the south continued. The political arena of Judah during Isaiah's time included four kings: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. Uzziah's success in the earlier part of his reign can be attributed to the political and military weakness of the Assyrian kings Shalmaneser IV (783-773), Asshur-dan III (773-754), and Asshur-nirari V (754-744). Repeated famines, revolts, and succession

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problems prevented these kings from expanding Assyrian influence. Assyria was torn during this time by internal strife and impacted by external pressure from the kingdom of Urartu in the north.[12]This helped Uzziah to be free from the Assyrian interference and to consolidate his control over the Philistines, Arabs, Meunites, and Ammonite areas (2 Chr 26: 6-8). Uzziah refortified the gates and walls of Jerusalem (2 Chr 26: 9) and insured the security of the nation. He opened a new seaport in Elath (2 Kgs 14: 22) and promoted a strong agricultural use of the land with new towns, wells, defensive walls even in the somewhat desert area in the south, called the Negev (2 Chr 26: 10). He was viewed as one who " did what was right in the eyes of the Lord" (2 Chr 26: 4-5). However, we also note that he did not destroy the popular high places where people worshiped other gods throughout the nation (2 Kgs 15: 15). Uzziah's strength became his weakness. His impressive legacy was interrupted when he proudly went into the temple in Jerusalem and burned incense to God, in spite of the objections of Azariah, the chief priest, followed by eighty priests. This was considered as an attempt to usurp the power of the priesthood. So Uzziah was struck with leprosy (2 Chr 26: 16-20).[13]From that time on, though actual power seemed to have remained with Uzziah, Jotham, Uzziah's son, ruled as coregent for about ten years until Uzziah died around 740. Jotham became sole ruler after Uzziah. Under him, Judah continued to be the most stable, prosperous, and powerful state in the area. Her wealth and military power placed her in the forefront of the anti-Assyrian movement when life in the ancient Near East changed dramatically as Tiglath-pileser (744-727)—also known as Pulu or Pul (2 Kgs 15: 19; 1 Chr 5: 26)—became the Assyrian king.

[14]Tiglath-pileser conducted campaigns to the western territories around <https://assignbuster.com/first-isaiahs-call-to-seek-justice-theology-religion-essay/>

743 to take control of Arpad and other small states.[15]By 738, he received tribute from the western states of Hamath, Damascus, Tyre, Byblos, and Samaria (Menahem paid tribute to him in 2 Kgs 15: 19).[16]In 734, he came again in the west seizing control of the Mediterranean coastal route subduing Tyre and Gaza. It was probably immediately after the Assyrian army withdrew that Rezin of Damascus and Pekah of Samaria launched their attack on Jerusalem (2 Kgs 16: 5). These two vassals of Assyria were trying to force Ahaz, who had already become coregent of Judah in 735, to join them in a coalition against Assyria. Since he refused, they attacked him in order to replace Ahaz with a ruler more sympathetic to their plans (Isa 7: 1-6). After Syria and Israel defeated most of Judah's forces (2 Chr 28: 6-8 reports the death of 120, 000 soldiers), Ahaz called on Tiglath-pileser to help him (2 Chr 28: 16). But when the Assyrian king came in 733, he not only defeated Syria, turning it into an Assyrian province, and took land and taxes from Israel (2 Kgs 15: 29), he also made Ahaz an Assyrian vassal and required a heavy tribute from him (2 Chr 28: 20-21). A successful Edomite and Philistine attack on Judah provided further evidence of Ahaz's military weakness (2 Chr 28: 17-18). When Tiglath-pileser died in 727, his son Shalmaneser V (727-722) succeeded him.[1]6 In 725 he came west and besieged Samaria for three years (2 Kgs 17: 1-6; 18: 9-10) until it fell in 722, the year that Sargon II, the successor to Shalmaneser, came to the throne. [1]7 These military events did not directly affect Judah, though the Assyrian presence nearby had an indirect impact. A large influx of people from Israel migrated to Judah to escape the Assyrian onslaught, thus greatly expanding the population.[1]8 In addition, an Assyrian campaign in neighboring Gaza of Philistia in 720 demonstrated that Judah was not out of the reach of the <https://assignbuster.com/first-isaiahs-call-to-seek-justice-theology-religion-essay/>

Assyrian army. After the death of Ahaz (Isa 14: 28), Hezekiah came to power in Judah. With Hezekiah's ascent to the throne came a change in Judah's foreign policy; although Ahaz had been pro-Assyrian, Hezekiah was firmly anti-Assyrian. He is remembered in the biblical texts as a good and pious king whose zeal for Yahweh and whose expansion and fortification of Jerusalem inspired the Deuteronomists to liken him to David (2 Kgs 18: 3). Particularly praiseworthy in the eyes of the Deuteronomists is the religious reform Hezekiah carried out (18: 4). Two key military events took place during his reign: (1) Assyrian King Sargon's campaign towards the Philistine city Ashdod about 713-711. (2) The succeeding Assyrian King Sennacherib's campaign against Judah from 703-701. Sargon spent the first few years of his reign trying to restore order in the rebellious provinces of Babylon, ruled by the Merodach-baladan (Isa 39: 1), Asia Minor, Media, and Urartu. Egypt's rising power also concerned the Assyrians, so to start with, around 713 Sargon came to take the rebellious Philistine city of Ashdod, which had hoped that Egypt would give it protection (20: 1-6).[2]2 Unfortunately Egypt failed to help these people, so Ashdod fell to Assyria in 711.[2]3 The prophet Isaiah's nakedness at this time was a sign to warn Hezekiah and the leaders of Judah not to depend on the Egyptians to protect them from the Assyrians, who would eventually defeat Egypt (20: 3-6). The next Assyrian incursion was in response to King Hezekiah's refusal to pay his tribute to Sargon (2 Kgs 18: 7) and to Hezekiah's seizure of Assyrian territory in Philistia (18: 8). Sargon was unable to respond immediately to this act of rebellion because of trouble he was having with Babylon in 710. Not long after this, Sargon died. So when Sennacherib came to power in 705 he faced widespread rebellion in Judah, in Egypt (2 Kgs 18: 21; 19: 9), and by Merodach-baladan in Babylon <https://assignbuster.com/first-isaiahs-call-to-seek-justice-theology-religion-essay/>

(39: 1-8). After Sennacherib put down the Babylonian rebellion, he attacked Sidon and then entered Palestine and forced Hezekiah to pay his back taxes (2 Kgs 18: 14-16; Isa 36: 1)[17]. The Taylor Prism of Sennacherib describes these events from the Assyrian point of view, at some points agreeing with and at some points disagreeing with the biblical record.[18]At this juncture, the Taylor Prism of Sennacherib makes mention of Sennacherib's defeat of the Egyptian forces in the plain of Eltekeh, parallel to events Isaiah records (36: 6; 37: 9). Having defeated Egypt, he turned his attention again to key cities in Judah, such as Lachish, Libnah (37: 8; 2 Kgs 19: 8), and eventually, Jerusalem. Now Hezekiah made extensive preparations in Jerusalem to withstand Sennacherib's attack (2 Chr 32: 3-5, 30). Sennacherib sent a high official, the Rabshakeh, to address the city of Jerusalem. The Rabshakeh came and asked Hezekiah to surrender and submit to Assyria (Isa 36: 6-20). Hearing this, Hezekiah went to the Temple to pray and sent a delegation to ask the prophet Isaiah to intercede before God for the people of Jerusalem. Isaiah sent a message to assure the king that the Assyrians would withdraw (Isa 37: 1-7). There is a second report of Hezekiah praying (37: 15-20) and a lengthy response from Isaiah, who speaks for Yahweh (37: 22-35). There is an uncertainty with what happened next. According to the biblical accounts, the angel of the Lord struck down 185, 000 people in the Assyrian camp, forcing Sennacherib to retreat to Assyria (2 Kgs 19: 35-37; 2 Chr 32: 21-23; Isa 37: 36-38). But in his account, Sennacherib boasts that " Himself [Hezekiah] I made a prisoner in Jerusalem, his royal city, like a bird in a cage." Though it is not possible to say with certainty what happened, sources agree that Jerusalem was neither captured nor destroyed. Later Sennacherib thoroughly defeated Babylon in 689, but in 681 Sennacherib was killed in a <https://assignbuster.com/first-isaiahs-call-to-seek-justice-theology-religion-essay/>

palace plot by his sons, and Esarhaddon succeeded him (2 Kgs 19: 37). The religious situation in Jerusalem changed dramatically after Hezekiah's coronation (715 BC). The accounts of his religious reforms and trust in God vary. According to the narrative in 2 Chr 29: 3–11, 15–36, Hezekiah repaired the temple, consecrated priests, renewed the nation's covenant with God, removed pagan elements his father brought into the temple area, and restored worship starting in the first year of his reign (715 BC). Later, he led the people of Judah, as well as Israelites from the northern territory of Ephraim (2 Chr 30: 6–11, 18), in a grand celebration of the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread (2 Chr 30: 1, 21). Sometime during these events, he destroyed many pagan places of worship in Judah and Ephraim (2 Chr 31: 1; 2 Kgs 18: 4). Hezekiah is pictured as a great reformer, a man of faith who encouraged his armies to trust in God for deliverance (2 Chr 32: 6–8), and who did so himself when he asked God to deliver them from the Assyrians (2 Chr 32: 20–21). Although Hezekiah later exhibited pride for a time (2 Chr 32: 25–26), he quickly repented and was blessed by God with great riches (2 Chr 32: 27–29). Some of the material in Chronicles is not mentioned in Isaiah or 2 Kings. On the other hand, the narratives in 2 Kgs 18–19 highlight Hezekiah's unique acts and prayers of faith (2 Kgs 18: 5–6; 19: 14–19), his courageous removal of Moses' bronze snake from the temple (2 Kgs 18: 4), his humiliation and payment of a large sum of gold and silver to the Assyrian king (2 Kgs 18: 14–16), and his sin of dependance on Babylon (2 Kgs 20: 12–18). Isaiah's own representation of the spiritual situation at this time is more complex. In support of Hezekiah, Isaiah celebrates Hezekiah's final decision to trust God for the defeat of the Assyrians (37: 14–20) and omits any reference to Hezekiah's humiliating payment of tribute, but by and large he

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does not paint a very positive picture of the spiritual condition of the people or leaders of Jerusalem in 701 BC. Instead, he condemns the revelry in Jerusalem as the people make military preparations for battle against Sennacherib (22: 1-13). He condemns their "covenant with death" (28: 15, 18), a reference to Judah's alliance with Egypt (30: 1-5; 31: 1-50). He prophesies that God would bring Jerusalem low (29: 1-4) but then would suddenly cause their enemies to become like dust (29: 5). He portrays the people as rebellious, deceitful, unwilling to listen to the law of God (30: 9), and in need of repentance (29: 15). They needed to trust God, for he was the one who would shatter Assyria (30: 31) and cause the Assyrians to flee (31: 8-9). It is true that Hezekiah removed idolatry from Judah, and his faith in God stood in stark contrast to Ahaz (7: 1-9); but in other ways Hezekiah and the leaders in Jerusalem were not much different. Both groups had a hard time listening to the prophet's word from God, both looked to foreign alliances for help, and it was equally difficult for both kings to come to that place where they could trust God for everything. This historical and religious background serves as a backdrop for Isaiah's messages. These chapters do not give a detailed historical account of everything that happened; they are primarily theological speeches to persuade Hezekiah and the people of Judah to trust God during the Assyrian crisis when Sargon II and Sennacherib invaded the land. Some expressly mention a war on Zion, treaties with Egypt, and the demise of Assyria, so their historical background is fairly certain, though the exact date may be unknown. The setting for other chapters is more difficult to determine. If most of the surrounding chapters have a known date, it is reasonable (though not necessary) to suggest a similar date for those that are not clearly connected to known events.

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2. 4 THE SOCIO-RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND

The change of social structures in Israel' s history contributed to the issue of social gap. Before the monarchic period, the Israelites were still living in tribal societies and they shared the egalitarian value of living. However, times were changing. The settlement of the Israelite tribes in Canaan changed in their social and economic structures. But some elements of tribal structures continued long after the settlement gradually were replaced by the appearance of the monarchy. This happened because the concept of —royalty|| created a class consciousness that had not previously existed, and, as a result, there was an emergence of a new class of royal officials in their society (cf Jensen 2006: 68). Consequently, the political centre existed in the society, wherein —all powers|| in every aspect of life were accumulated in a certain group of people. Gottwald (2001: 227) indicates that such a centre would, —in any event, have included the monarch, the members of the royal family, the chief officers of the main government responsible for the chains of command that carried out state decisions, and advisors to the court who might have official assignment or might be consulted on an ad hoc basis.|| This situation became bad because of the absence of a —power|| controller in the society. This condition continued on throughout the monarchic period in the northern kingdom of Israel, and until the middle of the eighth century BCE. In the final half of Jeroboam' s tenure, Israel had reached probably its height in terms of economic prosperity (cf Stuart 1987: 283). The success of Israel' s political expansion and stability brought prosperity to the nation in general. Amos reported that agriculture in Israel flourished in spite of occasional crop failures (4: 6-9). It is also important to mention here that in the context of a vassalage and an agrarian <https://assignbuster.com/first-isaiahs-call-to-seek-justice-theology-religion-essay/>

economy, the people of Judah would have to pay a share of their agricultural harvest and animal stock to both the Judean and Israelite monarchies (see Sweeney 2003: 193). While they controlled the strategic trade routes, they also gained profits through international trade. The control over the trade routes and the lively commerce nourished a growing wealthy class who lived in an elaborate way and brought, as Smith (1989: 2) noted, —the new wealth and access to expensive ivories and furniture (3: 15; 6: 4).|| Unfortunately, not all people of Israel enjoyed such luxurious living. It was only, in fact, experienced by a very few people. Mostly the ruling elite of Israel who were also the governing class, as Coote (1981: 25) indicates, —Comprising from 1 to 3 percent of the population, they typically own 50 to 70 percent or more of the land. . . . [and] control by far the greater amount of power and wealth in the society, and their positions of power exercise domain over the peasantry.|| In some studies of the social history of Israel, this development has been called —early capitalism.|| Mays (1987: 148), proposing this view, gives several reasons for saying it, namely: the shift of primary social goods and land from the functional support to that of capital; the reorientation of social goals from personal values to economic profit; and the subordination of judicial processes to the interest of the entrepreneur. It can be elaborated as follows, as Mays (1987: 149) adds that kings had appropriated land for the partial support of this administrative class, but they were left to some degree to manage their own support. They needed a basic capital to allow them to serve the crown. As officials, they also had the opportunity to gain from international trade. Their emergence created a group who had a vested interest in the accumulation of land and goods as capital. They were not originally an economic class, but they soon became one. Therefore, as the <https://assignbuster.com/first-isaiahs-call-to-seek-justice-theology-religion-essay/>

capitalists became the so-called ruling class, —the officials|| and —the leaders,|| they became socio-economically powerful and tended to be corrupt. It seems that during Amos' time, materialism had become prevalent, hedonism and selfishness increased, and social disparity intensified. The prophet also observed the luxury and extravagance of the wealthy, their summer and winter palaces adorned with costly ivory (3: 15) and their gorgeous coachs with damask pillows (3: 12) on which they reclined at their sumptuous feasts (6: 4-6). Even the women were likened by Amos to fat cows of Bashan (4: 1) who were addicted to wine and without compassion for the poor and needy (cf Kleven 1996: 215-227). The market was cornered by profiteering usurious commerce, false weights and fraudulent merchandise (refuse given for wheat) (8: 5-6). There was no justice in the land (3: 10) for every judge was corrupt (v. 12) and they turned —justice into poison|| and —the fruit of righteousness into wormwood|| (5: 7). According to Kuhl (1960: 61), Amos could objectively see such things because, —The man from Tekoa was sufficiently detached from affairs and people to realise the full extent of the abuses and wrongs in society in Samarian society.||The consequence was that this situation created the stark contrast between the luxury of the rich and the misery of the poor; where the rich enjoy indolent, indulgent existence (4: 1ff; 6: 1-6) in winter and summer houses (3; 13; 6: 11) and the poor become a tempting target for legal and economic exploitation (2: 6-8; 4; 1; 5: 10-12; 8: 4-6) (cf Mays 1969: 2-3). In reality, it seems that the rich prospered at the expense of the poor (4: 1) by crushing the needy, taking possession of the land of those who had fallen into debt or subjecting them to slavery (2: 6; 8: 4, 6), denying them justice in the lay courts at the city gates (2: 7; 5: 10, 12), and cheating them in the marketplace (8: 5). Smith <https://assignbuster.com/first-isaiahs-call-to-seek-justice-theology-religion-essay/>

(1989: 2) thus concludes that social conditions in Israel during Amos' time was soured by sin and greed. As Israel experienced economic boom, there was also an increase in religious activity. The shrines at Bethel, Dan, Gilgal, and Beersheba were constructed and had constant streams of worshippers bringing sacrificial animals (cf Miller & Hayes 1986: 312). The first two Israelite shrines, at Bethel and Gilgal, considered as the state temples, and the last two, at the high places of Gilgal and Beersheba provided spiritual identity to the nation (5: 5; 8: 1-14). The main architect behind these physical projects was Jeroboam II, who was closely related to Jeroboam I, the first king of Israel and the founder of the cult at Bethel according to Deuteronomistic tradition (see Coote 1981: 22). In order to observe religious activities at the temple, he appointed Amaziah to take the role of a high priest at Bethel. From the perspective of the Israelites, this religious —awakening|| was closely related to economic success. There was a belief that economic success was a sign of God' s favour towards them. From the perspective of Deuteronomistic theology, it was a common concept to believe that the success of Israel is a sign of divine favour (cf Wright 1965: 202). It seems that such eagerness in building religious physical objects was the expression of the people' s gratitude for God' s blessing and favour. Unfortunately, this motivation was ironically turned into self-satisfaction. While these activities happened, the ruling elite still oppressed the peasants who were really downtrodden and poor as mentioned earlier. It is understandable that behind the religious awakening, there also rose a religious hypocrisy. Stuart (1987: 284) argues that —Israel was a people often orthodox in style of worship but disobedient in personal and social behavior,|| or, as Achtemeier (1999: 170) directly points out, —the <https://assignbuster.com/first-isaiahs-call-to-seek-justice-theology-religion-essay/>

conscience of the rich placated by participation in an elaborate cultus. The Israelites thus were in a paradoxical situation. The economic and formal religious ascent were in co-existence with the moral and social decline. The more the Israelites built their shrines and offered sacrifices, the more they treated the poor and the powerless unfairly, as Smith (1995: 26) observes, —Israel's frequent attendance at the shrines to make sacrifices did not result in moral, spiritual and social uprightness. On the one hand, the Israelites did not only commit sins in the social sense but also religious ones. Amos's critics were not only directed toward social matters (2: 6-8; 3: 9-11, 13-15; 4: 1-3; 5: 7, 10-13; 6: 1-8, 11-12; 8: 4-7) but also towards cultic issues (4: 4-5; 5: 4-6, 14-15, 21-27; 8: 9-10). Although religious issues were not emphasized by Amos as much as the social ones, such a problem was quite serious. Accordingly, the Israelite religious institutions and theology were being perverted, misunderstood and rejected, and although they performed elaborate rituals as proud demonstrations of piety (4: 4-5), they were unrelated to justice and righteousness (5: 21-24) or to real seeking after God (5: 4-6) (see Smith 1989: 2; Mays 1969: 2-3). Besides, in a more specific way, Barstad (1987: 127-38) argues that the root of the religious sin of the Israelites was their worshipping other deities and because of this Amos insisted that YHWH is the sole legitimate God and the true source of fertility. It seems that the situation at that time was very contradictive. On the one hand, the religious life of the Israelites in terms of its performances and elaborations was very sophisticated; on the other hand, they neglected the very important substance of their religious faith, trusting and patronizing God with humility and having compassion to other fellow humans. As a result, this acute hypocritical attitude was strongly opposed by God and so

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Amos showed God's disapproval of such religious activities by announcing God's judgment upon the religious sites, by giving counsel to stay away from the sites, and by declaring God's rejection of their religious activities (Am 3: 14; 4: 4-5; 5: 4-5; 5: 22-24). This would culminate in the coming of the day of the Lord, which —instead of being a panacea for all the nations' ills, would bring disaster, as perverted religion and empty ritual must lead to political and economic crashes (Kaiser, Jr. 1998: 354). It is predictable that the fate of the people is at hand. The coming of Amos represented the judgment of God against Israel's disobedience and sins (see Williamson 2000: 291-306). Carrying God's commission, he challenged the Israelites because they had sinned against him by treating the divine and other fellow humans improperly. God's speech of judgment directly pointed to Israel but the action of judgment itself was indirectly being done by using the hand of the old powerful nation, the Assyrians. With the rise of Tiglath-Pileser III to the Assyrian throne in approximately 745 BCE, that mighty empire again embarked on an imperialistic policy, which included Palestine (cf Chisholm Jr. 1990: 10) and started again to regain influence in the west. Such a renewed westward campaign was supported by the mighty Assyrian army, which at that time had reached a high degree of competence and superiority to all opponents in equipment, technique and tactics (see Hermann 1975: 243). The Assyrian expansion was inescapable and became a serious external threat to the Israelites. It seemed that, on the one hand, the major political factor in the downfall of the northern Kingdom was the restoration of Assyrian power under Tiglath-Pileser (cf Flanders, Crapps & Smith 1988: 289). On the other hand, internal factor also contributed to the downfall of Israel, and the death of Jeroboam II (753 BCE). After his death, Israel had no

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longer any strong leadership and suffered under political unrest for years. Jeroboam's son, Zachariah (746-745 BCE) was in power only six months before being assassinated by Shallum (745). With the death of Zachariah, the four generations of Jehu came to an end (cf Kaiser, Jr. 1998: 352), and in a period of three decades (754-722 BCE) the powerful Northern Kingdom ceased to exist as an independent nation (cf Schultz 2000: 196). The destruction of Samaria may be considered the end of the Israelite Kingdom. Historically then this is the background of the preaching of the eighth century BCE prophets (cf King 1984: 14-), including Amos. According to their interpretation, the fall of Samaria was the result of Jeroboam's sin because it had allowed Israelites to engage in idolatrous practices and ignore their covenantal obligations (see Matthews 2005: 125). What was sown in sinful behaviours, such as violating God's law (and covenant) and mistreating other fellow humans was reaped in fates and miseries, destruction of the nation and, worst of all, the exile. Amos' message of judgment and doom was thus fulfilled and became a reality although the people who heard him did not believe him. The religious situation deteriorated dramatically during Ahaz's reign in Judah. He did not do what was right in God's eyes but supported the worship of Baal (2 Chr 28: 1-4). He even introduced into the courtyard of Jerusalem's temple a copy of a pagan altar he saw in Damascus (2 Kgs 16: 10-16), and he probably offered sacrifices to the Assyrian gods of his conquerors.[1]9 He removed some of the gold and bronze from the Jerusalem temple and palace furniture and gave it to Tiglath-pileser III as tribute. Ahaz's lack of faith in God was illustrated when he failed to trust God even when military victory was promised (Isa 7: 1-9). In 8: 6, Isaiah concludes that the people of Judah had rejected God (" the gently flowing

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water of Shiloh"), and in 8: 19-20 he refers to the people's pagan practices of depending on mediums and necromancy instead of following God's laws. The death of Ahaz is mentioned in Isa 14: 28 (715 BC), but since these oracles against several foreign nations are grouped topically, it is difficult to determine which ones come from the time of Ahaz and which fit into the reign of the next king, Hezekiah. The oracles against Damascus and Ephraim in 17: 1-14 discuss events during the time of Ahaz, but few others fit that time. Hayes and Irvine believe the condemnation of Babylon and the lament over its king in 13: 1-14: 27 describe Tiglath-pileser III defeating the Babylonian king Nabu-shuma-ukin around 729 BC, but this hypothesis has gained little support.[2]0 Most of these oracles probably come from the reign of Hezekiah.